

## Performance Bowings

### Bowing Terms Explained for Band-Trained Teachers

by Dr. Thomas Tatton

**W**hat an exciting three days: I recently returned from the 2013 Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic. There were lots of wonderful performing ensembles and clinics. One such clinic, given by Bob Phillips, ASTA President, was titled "Beginning Through Advanced Right-Hand Technique for Strings." In a one-hour session, Mr. Phillips tried to cover bowing terms, right-hand finger functions, sound creation, lanes, separated bow strokes, and left-hand skills that effect sound. Way too much for a wonderfully gifted pedagogue to cover in an hour. Even more so because the rather full audience was replete with wind players and teachers having to, or wishing to, teach strings or full orchestra. I know this by the soft chatter all around me with frantic note taking, each trying to capture all of the information Bob was sharing.

There are several notions to examine before delving into the bowing terms themselves.

String players use the term **bowing** to refer to the actual motion itself or, to the markings in the printed part or, the act of marking the desired bowing into a score or part, i.e., "We are going to bow the parts today." Or, to answer the question: "What are you doing?" "I am bowing the parts." Make sure you understand what that string person is referring to and/or that your students know how you are using that term.

String players bandy terms about that are sometimes confusing. For example, the word *détaché*.

*Détaché* can mean everything from very legato to somewhat detached or can simply mean an up and down bow stroke that is on-the-string. The same with the term *staccato*. *Staccato* can mean a brief separation, (not unlike *détaché*) to short, accented (*marcato*) to "hammered" (*martelé*) and everything in between.

String players mark bowings in a score or string parts that are frequently confusing. Often there are only subtle differences, or sometimes, no actual difference at all.

String players use different words and markings that enjoy different meanings in different historical periods and/or regional context. A dot (•) over or under a note head has a different meaning for Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Bartók, or John Adams. And, a term like *spiccato* in the 18th century has a different meaning in France than in Italy. That difference creates a difference in sound.

Lastly, a bit of luck, often the bow markings in the parts are explained and defined in the score preface. What a wonderful opportunity to start using these terms with our students. This is also an early opportunity to start a word wall.

#### All is Not Lost

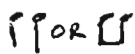
Only dilettantes, those attempting to impress and, perhaps a studio teacher or two at big name music schools parse words like *détaché* into *détaché porté*, *détaché lancé*, *grand détaché* or accented *détaché*. We don't really have to deal with that level

of sophisticated word usage teaching grade one through five pieces; especially since most string players and teachers aren't engaged at that level either. Further, most who use that level of terminology do not agree on definition, symbol, or usage.

Generally, bowings needed for most public school and youth symphony situations come in four families: 1) on-the-string, 2) off-the-string 3) various slurred varieties, and 4) special bowings. There is a fifth category included in many bowing explanations that we don't need to deal with here. They are used mainly for solo work and include: ricochet,<sup>1</sup> Jeté, staccato volante, and flying staccato can be included in this category. When a clinician comes in to work with your charges or when you start using these bowings,<sup>2</sup> clarify what is meant by the term used. Your students will understand your usage and know what you mean. For those experts who come in to your rehearsal ask them to define the terms they are using. *You need not be embarrassed, feel like you don't know anything, or be intimidated* – make sure you and your students understand how a word is being used – just ask.

**Family I. On-The-String bowings – Détaché:** any bow stroke that is up and down and on-the-string. Make sure the person who uses that term is specific. Again, détaché can mean legato, separated to varying degrees, emphasized or accented (marcato) to heavily accented (martelé). The terms marcato and martelé are almost always used independently from the term détaché. For example a string person might instruct an ensemble by saying: "Play those notes 'détaché' or 'marcato' or 'martelé.'" Then, he or she should explain how those notes are to be played and where in the bow, or better yet, demonstrate.

#### Chart for Common On-The-String Bowings



Notes without diacritical marks are simply played legato.



A dash over or under the note head can mean to hold out for full value (or more), i.e. tenuto. It can also mean a slight separation between notes or even to give that note emphasis or some weight. (A dash under a slur can mean up-bow staccato or an expressive bowing such as *louré* or *portato*. See slurred bowings)



A dash and a dot can also mean either a slight separation or a more staccato stroke. It can also mean a flautando stroke if marked *pp*. The flautando stroke is produced by using very light weight with

the bow and moving the bow fast across the string. This produces a sound that is light and airy, almost wispy – a flute-like sound and often used in a *mysterioso* section of music. The closer to the fingerboard the wispiest the sound – *Sul Tasto*.



A dot can mean staccato or spiccato or even marcato depending on dynamic. (Notes marked with a dot under a slur can mean up-bow spiccato. Usually one will see this with an up-beat or pick-up. See slurred bowings)



An accent can mean marcato (accented) or even martelé (heavily accented) Usually used with a percussive attack.



An accent with a dot indicates a heavy accent – marcato and martelé. This is sometimes marked with a wedge (▼).

**Family II. Spiccato:** any bow stroke that is an up and down bow stroke that comes off-the-string. We will talk in a different article about how far "off-the-string" the bow actually comes. Spiccato includes everything from a light "brush" stroke, to crisp, to accented, or sautillé.

#### Chart for Common Off-The-String Bowings



A dot above or below a note head can mean spiccato if the piece is at a speed the "bounce" can be controlled, or sautillé (also called saltado or saltando) if the tempo is fast enough for the bow to react with its natural bounce.



Successive down bows are very heavy and played at the frog.



Successive up-bow spiccato is very much like an up-bow staccato (see slurred) and used in the same way. The difference is the bow leaves the string. It is most effective lower in the bow – balance point and toward the frog often depending on the number of notes involved.

**Family III. Slurred bowings.** Slurs are notes (two or more) played under one bow direction, either up or down. The slur is the ultimate legato bowing yet there are other bowings that come under the term slur. Common slurred bowing variations include everything from simple two (or more) notes-in-a-bow to up-bow staccato and *louré/portato*. (Two or more notes that are hooked together in one bow with just a slight expressive pause between notes.)

Various slurred and hooked bowings are often used to create a positive bow distribution situation and/or solve bow geography difficulties.

<sup>1</sup> Ricochet is sometimes a stroke used in school music – think the *Overture to William Tell*. If your orchestra is planning to use ricochet then you are probably not in need of the information in this article.

<sup>2</sup> Start a vocabulary wall. Do not be afraid to use these terms as they are the terms string players use.

## Chart for Common Slurred Bow Bowings

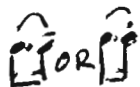


A slur includes multiple notes taken under one bow direction, either up or down.

A dash or a dot above or below note heads can mean up-bow staccato or spiccato. This is used often for up-beats or pick-ups and results in a strong down bow stroke on the first beat of the next bar.



Portato or Louré, both terms are used for a bow stroke of gentle separation. There is a quiet urgency or expressivity to this pulsing stroke.



There are various "hooked" bowings often with included dots or dashes. This bowing may be shown by dots or dashes within the slur depending on the desired length of the notes. Hooked bowing may also be shown as consecutive up or down bows marked above the notes heads.



The collé stroke is usually a gentle lift, especially for Baroque or early Classical styles. More contemporary usage collé can mean a pinched, lifted stroke.

### Family IV. Special bowings include:

Playing on-the-bridge: *sul ponticello* [It.], *sur le chevalet* [Fr.] or *am steg* [Gr.]. The bow is placed very close to the bridge – not actually on it – to achieve an ethereal, glassy or spooky sound.

Playing over the fingerboard: *sul tasto* [It.], *sur le touché* [Fr.] or *am griffett* [Gr.]. The bow is placed over the end of the fingerboard. This creates a soft, light sound – *flautando*.

Playing with the wood of the bow: *col legno* [It.], *avec le bois* [Fr.] or *mit holz* [Gr.]. The stick – wood of the bow is used to strike the string to get a different, rather "wooden" or "clinky" sound.

(Now, it must be said here that in more "today's" music, i.e. the music of the Turtle Island Quartet, the Kronos Quartet and others, the bow and right hand are used in some rather unique ways. This is a topic for another article.)

Tremolo, measured (that is a set number of iterations) or unmeasured is a difficulty. In most school music one slash  $\text{f}$  breaks into eight notes; two slashes  $\text{ff}$  breaks into sixteenth notes and three slashes  $\text{fff}$  is most often unmeasured tremolo. Tempo rarely changes this.

In music that one would use by, say Beethoven, Wagner, Mahler or Debussy, editions will vary. For the most part any note with three slashes (except in slow tempos where four slashes are sometimes

used) means unmeasured tremolo. With measured tremolo one line through a half note or a quarter note equals eight notes, two lines equals sixteenths. One line through an eighth note equals sixteenth notes; two lines equals thirty-second notes.

$\text{f}$  = sixteenth notes

$\text{f}$  = eighth notes

$\text{f}$  = eighth notes

$\text{ff}$  = sixteenth notes

$\text{fff}$  = thirty-second notes

With regard to tremolo – you may have a clear idea what is required, however, some of your orchestra members might not. Especially for measured strokes, make sure your string section members understand what is required and that you include this in your rehearsal. Otherwise, for a measured tremolo section of music someone in the back of a section might be using an unmeasured tremolo and mar an otherwise beautiful pulsating accompaniment.

In subsequent articles we will deal with easy and fun approaches to teach bowing lanes, bow geography, lifts, and bow speed and weight, and how to teach some bow strokes such as spiccato, martelé, and sautillé. There are also simple strategies for teaching awkward string changes/crossings and creating a more authentic Baroque sound without buying a slew of Baroque bows, resetting necks, and sawing off the fingerboard.

If you have specific questions please e-mail me at [tatton43@gmail.com](mailto:tatton43@gmail.com). I will answer promptly and perhaps even include your question in an article.

I recommend every string teacher have a copy of **Orchestral Bowings and Routines** by Elizabeth Green, and/or **Dictionary of Bowing and Pizzicato Terms** (4th Edition) by Joel Berman, Barbara G. Jackson and Kenneth Sarch. Both are published by American String Teachers Association and are available from Alfred Music or ASTA. **Orchestral Bowing: Style and Function** by James Kjelland is a fine book to also have at the ready. It is also published by Alfred Music.



Dr. Tatton is a retired string specialist with the Lincoln Unified School District in Stockton, California. His previous positions include Associate Professor of String Education, Music History, Violist in Residence and Director of Orchestras at both Whittier College and the University of the Pacific. His monograph on public school string teaching, **Connecting the Dots**, was published in 2003. He is currently active as a clinician and adjudicator as well as making appearances at school in-service training conferences. He is also the previous CMEA Orchestra Representative. E-mail him at [tatton43@gmail.com](mailto:tatton43@gmail.com)